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ABSTRACT

In November 1985, the Research Triangle Institute conducted a study of enrollment, staffing, governance and administration, and budget allocations in the North Carolina community colleges. The study involved an analysis of public records related to enrollment, staffing, and finances; an extensive study, including on-site interviews, of 12 representative institutions; a survey of all 58 community colleges for information on mission, special constituencies, staffing, funding, developmental priorities, enrollment trends, and transfer agreements; a survey of student interest in and use of special services and facilities; interviews with selected state-level and institutional administrations; and focus group interviews with students and community members. Study findings included the following: (1) staffing patterns varied considerably as a function of institutional size, student and staffing markets, and local variations in assignment of personnel allocations; (2) full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment was found to be the most generally appropriate basis for allocating operating funds to the institutions in terms of its capability to reflect the instructional staff workload; (3) the tradition of local control through the institutional boards appeared to be working well and in accordance with current statutes and regulations; (4) the state's community colleges were perceived by community members and prospective students as of higher educational status than the technical colleges or technical institutes; and (5) increases in college transfer tuition to the lowest of the current four University System tuition rates would result in an increase in tuition of about 129% for the community college students involved. The study generated 29 recommendations regarding areas including budget allocation formulas, research needs, administrative structures, conversion of technical colleges to community colleges, and tuition increases. (RO)

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The North Carolina Community College Study:
Mission, Enrollment and Staffing Patterns, Funding Procedures, and Administration and Governance

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

The North Carolina Community College Study: Mission, Enrollment and Staffing Patterns, Funding Procedures, and Administration and Governance

The Tasks

In the 1985 Legislative session, the North Carolina General Assembly asked the State Board of Community Colleges to determine, through an outside, independent study:

(1) proper staffing patterns for the System institutions;

(2) appropriate methods of calculating the FTE;

(3) the impact of more part-time students on needs for administrative and support personnel;

(4) the effectiveness of current governance and administration;

(5) whether technical institutions should convert to community colleges; and

(6) whether tuition for college transfer courses should be increased to University System levels.

Procedures

In a consequent study begun in November 1985, the Research Triangle Institute examined certain information of public record maintained by the Department of Community Colleges, with emphasis on enrollment, staffing, and budget allocation data since 1978-79; conducted an extensive study, including on-site interviews, with senior administrative staff at 12 representative institutions; requested, from all 58 institutions, information on mission, special constituencies, staffing, adequacy of allocations by line item, developmental priorities, intra-term enrollment trends, and transfer credit agreements; surveyed students' interest in and use of special services and facilities; and conducted interviews with the State President, the members of the State Board, and a sample of local board members and their presidents. Focus group interviews were also held with small groups of students, prospective students, and local community and business leaders.

Findings in Regard to Staffing

- Staffing patterns across the 58 institutions vary considerably, as a function of institutional size, student and staffing markets, and under allowable options, local solutions in assignment of personnel allocations to positions and salaries. It is apparent as well that the institutions are operating under extreme budget stringencies.

- Although the System trend is toward increased numbers of part-time students, there is considerable variability among the 58 institutions and among curriculum programs in current mix of full-time and part-time

students. For example, in 1984-85, the proportions of curriculum students who were full-time varied from 16 percent to 58 percent; and, while three institutions had the same or larger proportions of full-time curriculum students in 1984-85 than in 1978-79, three institutions at the other extreme had less than half the proportions of full-time curriculum students in 1984-85 than in 1978-79.

- Differences among the institutions appear with equal clarity in terms of numbers of students (the unduplicated headcount, or UDHC) relative to FTE (the index based on student contact hours used in budget formula allocations): institutional UDHC/FTE ratios in 1984-85 ranged from 3.2 to 1, to 8.6 to 1, with median value of 5.1 to 1. The comparable values in 1978-79 were from 2.9 to 1 to 6.6 to 1, with median value of 4.7 to 1.

- No clear association between staffing patterns, or between perception of staffing needs, and enrollment mix, were found. It was concluded that under the circumstances of budget stringencies and allowable local flexibilities, institutions develop their own relatively unique responses to cover the most urgent operational needs, emerging with varying solutions (e.g., replacing full-time with part-time staff, deferring lower priorities, requiring overtime work, using administrators as instructors, etc.).

- A number of administrative and instructional support positions were identified by the presidents as controlled by numbers of students rather than FTE. These include such positions as counselors, financial aid officers, registrars' staff, librarians, testing specialists, placement and follow-up staff, and accounting clerks. Part-time students--and in particular, those taking slightly less than full academic loads--confirm their interest in and need for the various instructional support services.

Findings in Regard to Methods of Calculating the FTE

- The FTE was found to be the most generally appropriate basis for allocating operating funds to the institutions, in terms of its capability to reflect the instructional staff work load. It does not recognize, however, certain real variations in costs due to differences in local labor markets; differences among programs because of going rates in industry for professionals who are recruited to staff positions; varying capabilities, because of particular program demands for small classes as well as size of institution, to meet the 22 to 1 student/teacher ratio; the actual costs of occupational extension instruction; and other factors unique to some but not all institutions.

- Although curriculum FTE enrollments as presently calculated are estimated to shrink by the end of the quarter in varying degrees dependent on program (by a median value of 15 or 16 percent), commitments to teaching faculty and students for course offerings must be made by the end of the drop/add period following registration each term; instructional costs remain relatively fixed after this point, regardless of attrition. The end of the drop/add period for most institutions is very close to the 20 percent point now used for calculating the FTE.

- A fairly significant variation in enrollments, by institution as well as for the System as a whole, does exist across the four quarters of the academic year. This variation is greater for curriculum than for extension programs, as summer quarter enrollments in the curriculum programs in particular tend to be lower than in the three other terms.

Findings in Regard to Effectiveness of Goverance and Administration

- The governance and administrative structure of the Community College System is relatively unique when compared with other states.

- The tradition of local control through the institutional boards appears to be working well and in accordance with current statutes and regulations.

- At the same time, there is a general perception of the value of a true "confederation" of the institutions into a System, with the State Board serving as the overall policy agent and as the prime representative to the General Assembly on overall fiscal needs. The special allocation tradition is seen by all parties--i.e., at both the State and local levels of governance and administration--as undermining both equitable assignment of funds to System priorities, and the proper authority of the State Board under the statutes.

- While the State Board is seen as the proper authority for governing and representing the System as a whole, there is mixed opinion concerning its effectiveness.

- The institution presidents are found to be, in general, a cadre of diverse individuals operating with considerable integrity, with their prime responsibilities to their boards, and with their boards to the needs of their communities.

Findings in Regard to Conversion to Community College Status

- A variety of issues, some discrete and some overlapping, are involved in conversion of technical institutions to community college status.

- The "community college" is viewed, by the communities and prospective students, as of higher educational status than the "technical college" or "technical institute." This may account in part for the fact that the last ten institutions to convert have not only met the minimum college transfer enrollment requirements in the two years following, but also have generally experienced increased enrollment in technical and vocational programs at higher rates than for the System as a whole.

- It is highly likely that the college transfer program appeals primarily to those for whom other academic higher education options are restricted, and the net effect of conversion on nearby four-year colleges appears to be one of increasing, not decreasing, their enrollment.

- It is generally believed that the addition of a college transfer program strengthens, not weakens, the vocational/technical programs. The vocational/technical mission appears not to be jeopardized by conversion.

- Virtually all of the System institutions have contractual arrangements with one or more senior institutions to accept transfer credit for general education, vocational, or technical programs. Yet, for courses outside a college transfer program in particular, acceptance by senior institutions for credit toward a baccalaureate degree is not assured.

- Conversion to community college status will result in increases in costs to the State, although these costs will probably be lower than recent worst-case estimates.

Findings in Regard to Increase of College Transfer Tuition to University System Levels

- Increases in college transfer tuition to the lowest of the current four University System tuition rates would result in an increase in tuition of about 129 percent for the community college students involved. Based on a conservative estimate of all costs associated with community college attendance, the increase in total cost to the student would be only about 17 percent.

- A change in tuition for college transfer courses is vigorously opposed by the institutions, not only on grounds of threat to educational opportunity for many constituents, but also because of difficult policy and operational issues involved in determining what fees to charge whom, discrimination against college transfer students, inverse relationship to program costs, etc.

- General fund revenues would probably increase if the lowest University System level tuition were changed, and if there were no changes in enrollment in college transfer courses from the 1984-85 levels. An upper limit to this increase would be in the neighborhood of $3 million.

- Modest increases in tuition across the board are not viewed as potentially significant deterrents by students and prospective students contacted.

Recommendations

Some 29 specific recommendations are made in the full report. The most important are:

- Base the additional allotment for administrative and instructional support positions on the Unduplicated Headcount rather than FTE; determination of the per-UDHC unit cost may be established through audit of current costs.

- Base allocation of instructional costs, for the present, on the FTE. Consideration should be given to increasing the per-FTE allotment, however, because of the stringencies imposed by present values in terms of number of positions and salaries.

- Calculate the FTE for budget allocation purposes at the end of a standard drop/add period, when financial and enrollment data of audit quality are available and when institutional commitments to students and staff are made. Operational simplification should be accomplished by making this count a part of the Prime system.

- Conduct a detailed study of the actual costs of instruction over the various programs with the objective of establishing revised budgeting formulas to reimburse institutions for actual costs for their program and student configurations.

- Maintain the present governance and administration structure of the System. The State Board should be strengthened to permit more effective discharge of its responsibilities delegated by the basic legislation, through more forceful assumption of existing responsibilities, or possibly through structural changes by the General Assembly.

- Re-examine the tradition of special allocations by the General Assembly, in terms of its potential deleterious impact on equity among the institutions, and on the strength of the State Board to operate the System as a System.

- Continue to permit applications from institutions desiring to convert to community college status, as their constituents and boards declare interest and readiness. It is not recommended--nor believed likely--that all technical institutions should be converted at one point in time to community college status. Neither is it recommended that no further conversions be considered.

- Require institutions desiring to convert to community college status to provide additional information in regard to program content, costs, acceptance by area colleges and universities, and impact on the vocational/technical mission.

- Include carefully established estimates of net costs to the State with recommendations by the State Board to the General Assembly for conversion to community college status.

- Maintain tuition for college transfer courses at the same level as for other curriculum courses. While increase in tuition for college transfer (or other) courses to University System levels is not recommended, this does not rule out consideration of modest across-the-board increases in tuition rates for the Community College System.

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